

Jack Whitten



"The ball is flying, you don't think of catching it, you catch it . . . My painting is a form of drawing. In the process of raking—raking is line—things happen. The whole painting is line. The whole painting is *one* line, let's face it. Some people take joy in the fact that nothing is happening—But Pollock, Rothko, Kline, these are my guys, these are my gods.

Do you know that Crete is the edge of the Western World? That's where we in the West draw the line. Right across those waters is Africa. Soho—the whole thing turns into a flea market . . . As for scale, I used to play tenor sax—not the soprano and not the bass clarinet or bass saxophone. Nice mellow tones. Not too big, not too small but like John Hancock's signature . . . able to be read. That's my idea of scale.

These works were painted 1973-74. The main thing is immediate raking, horizontal rakings. They're organized by chance. When I rake them in a split second, there's no way of knowing. It's a gambling situation, but you set up the situation to gamble with a lot of paint, maybe gallons of paint . . . This is my idea of history: History traveling in a straight line like my horizontals. I catch a piece of it, but it's going forever. It's part of a story that's been going on, still is going on, and always will be going on. The space I gave you is a frame that freezes a piece of action.

You take paintings built on grid systems. I don't structure like that. It gives you a play pen to play in, then you can do anything you want to. I don't have that play pen. I rake across and develop it and what happens, happens . . . You might see a face, a landscape. But it's not a crude legibility.

Whatever happens, I want to trap it in the surface. I'm really *into* surface. And I'm working with things that go very fast. It has something to do but is simpler than the "speed" of abstract expressionism. De Kooning said he wanted one skin, but he goes through several manipulations to get that skin. I want one skin too, but I want it in one physical manipulation.

It's like light, like a camera trapping something in a single fix. A camera is dark, a certain amount of light enters and the amount of light is what *TRAPS* the image. Whatever happens on the plane of my painting has to take place instantly and has to catch and freeze something.

When I say speed I'm not talking of the emotions. I keep coming back to the word *PHYSICAL*. My platform is a heavy constructed platform—it's a huge architectural drawing board. It's a draughtsman's situation. The paint is applied very much like a tile setter, filling a layer of mortar. It is called "floating," and one must

have the experience of knowing just how much concrete is needed to set the tiles in place. So my paint is put down, like a workman putting up a sidewalk . . . The word "develop" is important. A huge 12-ft. piece of metal attached to a wood frame, that is my DEVELOPER, which rakes across the plane. It happens very fast. De Kooning needed big house painters' brushes. I took one of those brushes and blew it up to twelve feet. I have a twelve foot brush. I have a vast brush: 40-50 lbs, easy.

Harsh criticism might call this landscape painting . . . But there is no most powerful region. There is no horizon line in my painting. I don't know if it's a Jungian "big dream."

On Lispenard Street I'd sit by the window and see a certain color on the street, a color someone was wearing on a shirt, I'd go back and grab that color and mix it and put it in. Take Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. He uses tons of dirt; I use paint. Art comes from everywhere. I can be a saint and make art. I can be a stone devil and make art."

Biography

1939 December 5th, born in Bessemer, Alabama
Presently living and working in New York City

Education

1957-59 Tuskegee Institute, Alabama
1959-60 Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana
1960-64 The Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture, New York

Teaching Positions

1968-69 Queens College of the City University of New York
1969-70 Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York
1970-
 present Manhattan Community College, New York
1971-
 present The Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture, New York
1973 Visiting artist at California Institute of Arts and University of California at San Diego

Awards

1964 John Whitney Fellowship
1973 National Endowment Grant
1974 Xerox Grant in Xerography

One-Man Exhibitions

1968 Allan Stone Gallery, New York
1970 Allan Stone Gallery, New York

Group Exhibitions

1959 State Wide Group, Xavier University, New Orleans, Louisiana
1962 Edios Group, New York
1963 Westerly Gallery, New York
1965 "Four Voices — One Theme," Allan Stone Gallery, New York



1968 "New Voices: 15 American Artists," American Greetings Gallery, New York
 "In Honor of Dr. Martin Luther King," The Museum of Modern Art, New York

1969 "Five Plus One," State University of New York at Stony Brook, New York
 "Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

1970-71 "New Work," American Federation of Arts, New York

1971 "Untitled II," The Museum of Modern Art, Penthouse Gallery, New York

1972 "Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
 "Contemporary Paintings," The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut

"Current American Abstract Paintings," Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York

1973 "Four Painters," Poindexter Gallery, New York

1974 "Abstract Paintings," Pratt Institute Gallery, Brooklyn, New York

August 20-September 22, 1974

Whitney Museum of American Art

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